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ABSTRACT

Lifelong learning should be seen as both an educational and a social practice in which learning occurs throughout individuals' lives and throughout society in a wide range of contexts (including the workplace), involves both formal and informal learning, and is facilitated by an extensive range of partnerships and networks. Vocational education and training (VET) must acquire a new humanism with a focus on people as a way of investing in human intellect, imagination, and creativity. Five key dimensions for achieving lifelong learning that can serve as a coherent and integrated template for thinking about how lifelong learning might be achieved are as follows: (1) establish the foundations for lifelong learning; (2) strengthen and develop pathways, bridges, and transitions; (3) foster learning organizations and institutions; (4) extend the role of information and learning technologies; and (5) develop lifelong learning communities. In Australia and elsewhere, a convergence of VET and general education would potentially address the needs of a knowledge-based economy, lead to a more integrated system with stronger linkages to other sectors, and build on current VET reforms. (Contains 17 references. Appended are a diagram illustrating lifelong learning capability, and profiles of the learning organization and the learning city.) (MN)

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LIFELONG LEARNING

Implications for VET

a discussion paper

Peter Kearns

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Lifelong learning: Implications for VET

Discussion paper

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Foreword

Lifelong learning for all has become the central imperative in what has been called 'The Learning Age.' This imperative—driven by economic, technological, and social change—is recognised by governments, international agencies, enterprises, organisations, and institutions around the world.

However, the extent to which education and training systems in Australia have adapted to the requirements of lifelong learning for all is not known. What *is* known is that the challenge of lifelong learning for all in the emerging conditions of the 21st century requires new ways of thinking about the role of vocational education and training (VET) and its relationships with other stakeholders, in the transition to a learning society. I hope that this paper will stimulate a wide-ranging discussion of the implications of lifelong learning.

This paper—one of a series prepared by the UTS Research Centre for Vocational Education and Training, as part of its responsibilities as a national key centre—was written by Peter Kearns, managing director of Global Learning Services. It was edited by Delia Mazzina, research manager of the Centre.

Professor Rod McDonald
Director
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Contents

Foreword *iii*

Executive summary *vii*

1 Background *1*

2 **Lifelong learning** *3*
Lifelong learning: An evolving concept
Key dimensions of lifelong learning
Lifelong learning: International perspectives

3 **Vocational education and training** *7*
Existing and future challenges for VET
VET reform: Towards lifelong learning

4 **Change and convergence: From VET to lifelong learning** *11*
The individual
Organisations: Changed responsibilities, new relationships
The workplace
Connections: Pathways, bridges, transitions

5 **VET in a learning society** *19*
Assumptions for the future
Benefits to stakeholders
From vision to strategies to reality

Notes *23*

References *25*

Appendices *27*
1 Lifelong learning capability
2 Profile of the learning organisation
3 Profile of the learning city

Executive summary

In a context of growing international recognition of the need for lifelong learning, this paper has been prepared to provide a basis for discussion of the implications of the concept for vocational education and training (VET) in Australia.

The paper presupposes certain basic assumptions:

- The pressure of global forces will impose great change on VET systems in Australia in the next century. It is better to anticipate, plan for, and manage such changes, rather than to see them imposed by indifferent, external forces.
- Some approaches to change will lead to better outcomes than others, and a humanist approach to change will lead to the best outcomes.
- Lifelong learning, in the context of a learning society, is the inevitable direction for the future. Australia should, can, and will become a 'learning society' in which lifelong learning opportunities will be available to all.

This discussion paper argues the need for VET to broaden its scope in response to the anticipated changes of the 21st century, and to 'converge' with what we now think of as 'lifelong learning.' The result of such convergence will be a new form of learning, different in character from the prior forms, and better able to meet the needs of individuals and society as a whole.

Growing international consensus on the need for a lifelong learning approach is documented by reference to recent work carried out in the United Kingdom and under the auspices of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). (See Section 1 Background.) The centrality of the notion of a knowledge-based society, dependent on 'human capital,' underscores the humanist approach which appears to drive much of the thinking in this area.

The concepts of lifelong learning and VET embody a variety of meanings. Section 2, Lifelong learning shows that the notion of lifelong learning is still evolving, and provides a range of descriptions. Table 2: Five dimensions of lifelong learning in a learning society, offers a coherent and integrated template for thinking about how lifelong learning might be achieved. The final part of this section details the OECD and UNESCO perspectives on lifelong learning.

Section 3, Vocational education and training, considers the challenges currently facing the VET system in Australia, placing them in the context of global change and its ramifications in every aspect of society. The central point is made that, in this context, knowledge is the prime source of competitive advantage. Beyond this are more specific issues: the challenge to social cohesion, and the challenge for stakeholders. The former challenge has already taken shape; the latter is a

reminder of what is still at risk. Finally, this section deals with recent reforms in VET, which are to varying degrees consistent with principles of lifelong learning and a learning society. The move towards convergence may have already begun, though much more remains to be done.

The thematic concept of convergence, and the changes it would demand, are fleshed out in Section 4, Change and convergence: From VET to lifelong learning. Consistent with the humanist approach of this paper, this section deals first with the individual, whose primary need in a learning society will be for a solid foundation—what the author calls 'learning-to-learn' skills. In addition, the ideal learner will be required to develop a wide range of personal qualities, set out in table 2: Profile of the lifelong learner.

Beyond the individual, organisations will find that their responsibilities and relationships are changing in order to accommodate their new and different needs. The author identifies the three pillars of a learning society as

1 formal education and training
2 the enterprise sector
3 the community sector

The responsibility of the VET sector must also then expand, in order to link these sectors in a framework for lifelong learning.

At a more universal level, the newly defined role of the workplace as an important location for lifelong learning is considered to be a cornerstone of economic success. The paper acknowledges the importance of a supportive learning environment and presents factors which indicate how this might be achieved. The link between workplace learning and formal VET is also examined, particularly in relation to recognition of prior learning. Finally, the unique position and needs of the small business sector, as a significant source of job creation and growth, are addressed.

Section 4 concludes by examining pathways, bridges and transitions that allow (or prevent) an individual moving from school to work, from unemployment to employment, from job to job, or returning to paid work after a voluntary absence. This ties together the various elements of individuals, organisations and workplaces, and makes explicit the broad agenda of partnerships and networks which will be essential to support a genuinely learning society.

The fifth and final section of the paper, VET in a learning society, looks towards the future and towards a learning society, in which human capital would be explicitly acknowledged and valued as the foundation of a successful society; a future where lifelong learning would be supported by a network of partnerships and linkages between all sectors of society. The benefits to stakeholders, implicit throughout the paper, are here clearly defined.

The paper concludes with a clarion call for thought, discussion and partnerships in achieving a shared vision for VET in the 21st century. We are reminded of the power of a shared vision, in providing 'stars to steer by,' and in harnessing energy, commitment and idealism towards shared purposes.

1 Background

There is a growing international consensus that the provision of lifelong learning for all has become imperative in the emerging socio-economic conditions of the 21st century. This was recognised when the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Education Ministers declared in 1996:

> *Lifelong learning will be essential for everyone as we move into the 21st century and has to be made accessible for all.* (OECD 1996, p.21)

Similar conclusions have been reached by other international bodies such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the European Union, and the Council of Europe. The British Government, among others, has issued a Green Paper this year for national consultations on lifelong learning with a view to government initiatives in this area.

> *We have no choice but to prepare for this new age in which the key to success will be the continuous education and development of the human mind and imagination.* (UK Green Paper 1998)

This declaration emphasises a central fact: a knowledge-based information society requires, for its success, different qualities from those required in past industrial and service economies. The stakes are high if Australia is to remain a competitive and prosperous society in the 21st century, able to ride the waves of global capitalism. In order to achieve this, it must develop into a 'learning society,' in which 'everyone should be able, motivated, and actively encouraged to learn throughout life.'[1] There is no choice but for VET to be re-oriented to the new imperatives for lifelong learning. As the British Green Paper points out:

> *The information and knowledge-based revolution of the 21st century will be built on a very different foundation—investment in the intellect and creativity of people.* (UK Green Paper 1998)

The central thesis of this paper argues for a new humanism in VET, with a focus on people, as a way of investing in human intellect, imagination and creativity. In addition to an enhanced quality of life and greater equity, industry will gain from a more committed, imaginative, and creative workforce able to adapt to rapidly changing conditions.

2 Lifelong learning

Lifelong learning: An evolving concept

The concept of lifelong learning has evolved in recent decades, with shifts in response to contextual changes. A useful definition has been given by the European Lifelong Learning Initiative (ELLI):

> *Lifelong learning is a continuously supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge, values, skills and understanding they will require throughout their lifetimes and to apply them with confidence, creativity and enjoyment in all roles, circumstances, and environments.*
>
> (World Initiative on Lifelong Learning 1995, p.5)

This broad definition of lifelong learning points to the wide range of social, psychological, economic, and community roles that the concept of lifelong learning embodies.

Lifelong learning should be seen as both an educational and a social practice, and as an organising principle for a different approach to education and training, in which learning

- occurs throughout society in a wide range of contexts which include the workplace
- occurs throughout the life cycle of an individual
- involves both formal education and training and informal learning in many contexts
- is facilitated by an extensive range of partnerships and networks

A learning society will incorporate many forms of partnership, and requires the development of many linkages, particularly across the sectors of

- formal education and training
- the enterprise sector
- the community sector

Both OECD and UNESCO point to new ideas underpinning the contemporary view of lifelong learning:

> *Everyone should be able, motivated and actively encouraged to learn throughout life.*
>
> (OECD 1996, p.15)

> *Not only must [lifelong learning] adapt to changes in the nature of work, but it must also constitute a continuous process of forming whole human beings—knowledge and aptitudes as well as the critical facility and ability to act.* (UNESCO 1996)

Other characteristics, such as the growing role of modern learning technologies, further distinguish lifelong learning from a traditional system of education and training.

Key dimensions of lifelong learning

Table 1 sets out five key dimensions for achieving lifelong learning for all in a learning society. The suggested dimensions are based on the view that individual and social learning are mutually supportive and interactive. Actively fostering learning organisations and communities is the best way to extend individual learning on a whole-of-life basis and to develop a learning culture in which lifelong learning for all becomes a reality. A central issue then becomes how to promote the necessary linkages and concerted action.

Table 1: Five dimensions of lifelong learning in a learning society

Foundations for all lifelong	Provision to ensure that everyone achieves the foundations for learning: • learning-to-learn skills • motivation and desire for learning • personal mastery to drive lifelong personal development
Strengthening and developing pathways, bridges and transitions	• Strengthen and extend pathways through education and training into work. • Support the key transitions individuals face. • Ensure support and safety net provision for disadvantaged groups and individuals.
Foster learning organisations and institutions	• Encourage enterprises, institutions, and government agencies to develop as learning organisations. • Integrate work and learning in enterprises. • Recognise informal learning in the workplace.
Extend the role of information and learning technologies	• Ensure everyone achieves basic information literacy. • Make modern learning technologies widely available through the community. • Support and encourage individuals lacking confidence in the use of these technologies. • Use modern technologies to widen equitable access to education and training opportunities.
Develop learning learning communities	• Encourage and support communities at all levels to develop as communities: towns, cities, local communities, and common interest networks. • Foster partnership and network development as a key component of learning communities. • Generally foster a learning culture to underpin economic activity and quality of life for all in a learning society.

Profiles of a learning organisation and a Learning City are given in appendix 2 and appendix 3. There is a growing international interest in the concept of a Learning City, and an active Learning City Network now exists in Britain, with some of Britain's best known cities as members. The Learning City profile and strategy could be applied to a community of any size.

Lifelong learning: International perspectives

Valuable insights into the implications of lifelong learning can be obtained from the current activities of international agencies such as OECD, UNESCO, and the European Commission. All of these agencies have given priority to this subject in their current work.

OECD

An OECD analysis prepared for the 1996 Meeting of Education Ministers was undertaken in terms of four goal areas:

- strengthening the foundations for learning throughout life
- promoting coherent links between learning and work, by establishing pathways and bridges that facilitate movement between education and training and work
- re-thinking the roles and responsibilities of all partners
- creating incentives for individuals, employers and other stakeholders to invest in lifelong learning[2]

Below is a discussion of the Australian situation in relation to these goal areas. It is necessary to assess how current policies and strategies in Australia align with these goals for a framework for lifelong learning.

UNESCO

UNESCO examined the emerging needs for lifelong learning through the Report of its Commission on Education for the 21st century. Key aspects of this report involved:

- the identification of learning throughout life as the 'heartbeat of society'
- the need for a fresh approach to the stages and bridges of learning
- its emphasis on social cohesion in the emerging conditions of the 21st century
- its concept of four pillars underpinning the development of education:
  1. learning to know
  2. learning to do
  3. learning to live together/learning to live with others
  4. learning to be[3]

The concept of four pillars involves broadening education into important areas of personal development and social experience that are seen as increasingly important in the emerging conditions of the 21st Century. VET to date has focused on learning to *know* and learning to *do*. Other international perspectives, in such areas as development of concepts of the learning organisation, are relevant to assessing the current Australian situation with regard to lifelong learning.

3 Vocational education and training

Existing and future challenges for VET

As Australia approaches the 21st century, the VET system is challenged by a number of shifts in the context of its work. These involve:

- the development and impact of globalisation
- the development of new information and communication technologies
- a shift from an industrial and service economy to a knowledge-based economy
- changes in the workplace and in the organisation of work
- shifts in social attitudes and values towards work and leisure

The cumulative impact of these developments has led to changes in the context of VET. The new environment of VET is marked by escalating change and discontinuity in the drive towards a post-industrial information society. In this context, knowledge is the prime source of competitive advantage. This advantage derives from the role of information and communication technologies and from the pace of change across many industry sectors. This in turn creates opportunities for those able to adapt to changing conditions in an era of 'man-made brainpower industries.'[4]

The extent and pace of change means that existing assumptions, habits and attitudes are increasingly being questioned. Escalating change in the workplace means that a capacity for lifelong learning—that is, the process of learning new skills and acquiring new knowledge, repeatedly and indefinitely—is becoming recognised as an essential aspect of survival in the workforce.

The challenge to social cohesion and equity

A key challenge thrown up by the new environment of VET relates to preserving a democratic, inclusive society. The danger now exists of what has been termed a 'two-thirds society'[5]: a society comprising a diminishing majority who have the capability and motivation to adjust to the new conditions, and an under-privileged (and growing) minority who lack this capability. In this context, fostering a lifelong learning capability for all, as a means to empowerment and employability, becomes a critical challenge if Australia is to avoid a society divided into the information-rich and privileged, and the information-poor and under-privileged.

The challenge for stakeholders

A range of stakeholders have an interest in promoting lifelong learning for all

For	Lifelong learning will impact on
Governments	Economic performance, earnings, social cohesion, and quality of life
Employers	Availability of a committed, flexible, and adaptive workforce with a capacity for continuous learning and improvement
Individuals	Employability in a dynamic and uncertain context of change; personal fulfilment and empowerment in work and social contexts
Education and training providers	Relevance of their work in the emerging conditions of the 21st century while developing new strategies and forms of partnership
Community bodies	Contributions to a learning society; development of a learning community with enhanced quality of life

These interests will interact in the transition to a learning society, and the potential exists for many points of contact, interaction, and exchange in furthering lifelong learning.

VET reform: Towards lifelong learning

While lifelong learning has seldom been an explicit goal in VET reform in Australia, a decade of reform has been directed at achieving an industry-led VET system that is competency-based, flexible, and responsive to client needs. Throughout this decade, reform has generally moved in directions that are consistent with opening up access to the system, and opportunities for lifelong learning. (Despite such reforms, issues continue to be raised regarding the extent to which such a system, in practice, facilitates lifelong learning.) These objectives have been furthered through strategies such as:

- re-focusing training reform on the demand side
- promoting user choice and training markets
- promoting greater responsiveness through flexible delivery of training
- developing a diverse range of pathways through the Australian Vocational Training System (AVTS) and later New Apprenticeships and VET in schools
- addressing the needs of disadvantaged groups through special programs
- streamlining relationships through the National Training Framework and the Training Package approach

While these reforms have done much to open up lifelong learning opportunities, the Australian VET system still exhibits the signs and symptoms of a system in transition, with reforms remaining incomplete.

Moreover, *the orientation of reform has been towards implementing a training paradigm* whose roots, though modified, lie in an industrial society—*while the learning aspects of reform have been relatively neglected.* Determining whether a knowledge-based society requires a different approach to learning and training requires more attention. This includes an examination of

- training as a product and learning as a process

- training cultures and learning cultures in a range of contexts—for example, in the small business sector, and in local communities
- economic and social objectives and roles of VET, including the points of intersection, exchanges and synergy between economic and social development
- VET and the other sectors of education

Managing the transition to a learning society with lifelong learning for all makes these questions significant.

4 Change and convergence: From VET to lifelong learning

The individual

Foundations for lifelong learning: A humanist approach

It is important to recognise that a capability for lifelong learning by an individual involves a mix of attitudinal influences, learning-to-learn skills, and other generic competencies—such as the key competencies, which are involved in learning in specific contexts. These foundations are illustrated in appendix 1. Personal and career development throughout life involve on-going interaction between ways of being, skills, and knowledge.

For an individual to have the capacity for lifelong learning, it is believed that certain foundations are essential:

- learning-to-learn skills
- motivation and desire for learning
- confidence to keep learning throughout life
- personal mastery[6] as a basis for empowerment in work and in society

While there is a general expectation that the foundations for lifelong learning are laid in schools, the VET sector has an important role in building on these foundations and orienting them to a workplace context. Moreover, VET and Adult and Community Education (ACE) provide a 'second chance' for individuals who have not achieved proficiency in basic skills during schooling.

The VET sector has supported learning-to-learn skills in a number of ways, such as the provision of workplace literacy programs and the inclusion of key competencies in VET delivery. Key competencies (such as collecting, analysing, and organising information, working with others in teams, and solving problems) involve generic learning-to-learn skills that are transferable between specific work contexts.

The key competencies have been a valuable inclusion in VET provision. However, there are questions as to whether they include all the generic skills that are relevant to learning-to learn, beyond the basic foundations that are laid by schools. Specifically, these questions relate to

- the personal development competencies that influence attitudes to learning, and hence capability
- a capacity for cross-cultural understanding that bears on learning in a globalised society and an increasingly diverse workforce
- whether the need for a more creative and innovative workforce has been sufficiently addressed

A rapidly changing and uncertain society places additional responsibility on the individual for on-going personal development as a basis for maintaining employability and for living an active life. In this context, personal mastery and on-going personal development become necessary for empowerment in both the workplace and in society, particularly where the notion of employability is changing rapidly:

> *The concept of employability... is broadening. Productive work habits, personal confidence, decision making skills, and a commitment to learning are as important as specific vocational skills.* (OECD 1997)

In the light of the growing significance of such attitudinal factors as the key to an individual's capability for lifelong learning, the question arises as to how motivation and desire for learning, and qualities such as self-esteem and confidence, can best be fostered. These attributes are especially important for groups disadvantaged in access to education and training, and should be a target of equity strategies.

The role of VET in contributing to these necessary attributes, in collaboration with a range of partners, requires close attention. VET institutions, in particular, have a responsibility to adopt strategies in their work that will foster the development of a lifelong learning capability in their students. Overall, the main issue in the area of foundations is the question identified in advice from the Employment and Skills Formation Council to the Minister for Employment, Education and Training:

> *The Council considers that the main question is the extent to which learning-to-learn features are present or inherent in vocational education and training, as well as the extent to which vocational education and training promotes lifelong learning through its content, structure and processes.*
> (National Board of Employment, Education and Training 1996)

Profile of the lifelong learner

The characteristics of a lifelong learner in the emerging conditions of the 21st century need to be identified as the basis for a framework for lifelong learning in Australia. A suggested profile of a lifelong learner is set out in table 2 as a basis for discussion. Such lifelong learners will have the capability to become what the economist Lester Thurow has called 'the real heroes of the future...who have the ability to dream, the will to conquer, the joy of creating, and the psychic drive to build an economic kingdom.'[7]

Table 2: Profile of the lifelong learner[8]

An inquiring mind and curiosity	• Has a sense of curiosity and question asking • Has a love of learning and discovery • Has reflective habits • Can apply strategies to enhance creative resourcefulness
Helicopter vision	• Has a sense of the interconnectedness of things • Is able to apply systems perspectives and 'see the big picture' • Has the capacity for strategic thinking • Has a vision that goes beyond own job or field of study
A repertoire of learning skills	• Has learning-to-learn skills • Knows own strengths, weaknesses and preferred learning styles • Has a range of strategies for learning in various contexts • Is able to learn from others in teams • Understands different kinds of learning
A commitment to personal mastery and on-going development	• Has motivation, a desire for learning throughout life, and confidence in own learning capability • Has a commitment to on-going personal and career development • Has self-esteem and a positive concept of self as capable and autonomous • Has the capacity to deal with change
Interpersonal effectiveness	• Has the ability to learn from others in teams • Has the ability to give and receive feedback in team learning situations • Has a group orientation and can contribute to team learning • Has cultural understanding and can learn in situations involving cultural diversity in Australia and overseas
Information literacy	• Has the ability to locate, evaluate, manage, and use information in a range of contexts • Can use modern information technologies for these purposes • Has a good sense of knowledge acquisition and generation, and can contribute to turning workplace learning into shared knowledge

Organisations: Changed responsibilities, new relationships

> *Strategies for lifelong learning for all imply new roles and responsibilities for a wider variety of actors and stakeholders—learners of various types, their families, teachers, social partners (employers and unions), and governments. There is a task for the partners in revisiting goals, curriculum and teaching and learning methods, as well as in redefining governance and management.* (OECD 1996, p.18)

An effective framework for transition towards lifelong learning for all requires clarification of the roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders in such a system. The central issue is how we progress towards a shared understanding of Australia as a society in which lifelong learning is the norm.

The stakeholders in this process include individuals, employers, unions, governments, education and training providers, and a wide range of community bodies. Like higher education, the VET sector has distinctive and important responsibilities in the learning society. This role needs to be clarified and communicated to all.

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Progressing towards a learning society requires the development of interconnections and interdependencies, within and between education and training and other sectors of the community. The wider adoption of systems thinking and ecological perspectives will facilitate this process. The development of linkages and partnerships should have regard to the three pillars of a learning society:

- formal education and training
- the enterprise sector
- the community sector

The VET sector has a distinctive responsibility in linking these sectors in a framework for lifelong learning. The more linkages and connections that can be forged between these sectors, the richer will be the outcomes for stakeholders. There is a need for extensive discussion, at all levels, of the issues raised in rethinking roles, responsibilities, and relationships—and for ways of building an on-going dialogue about how Australia can grow towards being a learning society. While discussion must extend beyond the VET sector, VET can be a constructive contributor to the dialogue. Issues for discussion include:

- the role of public policy in facilitating lifelong learning opportunities for all
- the intervention of governments in markets for learning, for example to ensure equity objectives
- the roles and responsibilities of employers and unions
- the role of community bodies including the ACE sector
- how to foster a shared vision
- how to concert action at various levels including the exchange of ideas, for example local and regional communities, and national action

Much would be gained through a 'grass roots' approach whereby such issues would be discussed by local and regional communities, within individual firms, and by industry associations and Industry Training advisory bodies (ITABs). Exchanges of ideas through regional networks along the lines of the Victorian Industry Education Partnership (VIEP) could further this process of dialogue and make it educative for all stakeholders. VET institutions could exercise a leadership role in initiating discussion within their communities. *Emerging ideas such as the Learning City and Learning Organisation concepts can contribute much to advancing lifelong learning opportunities for all.*

The workplace

> *Change is redefining today's workplace.*
>
> (American Society for Training and Development 1997)

In a learning society, learning occurs in a diverse range of situations. Of particular significance for the purposes of this paper is the learning that occurs in the workplace. Changes in the workplace, as discussed above, interacting with the globalisation and new technologies, have resulted in a situation where

- continuous learning is essential in adapting to change, maintaining employability, and maintaining the competitive positions of firms
- a capability for continuous learning becomes the cornerstone of economic success

- on-going learning enhances the human capital of firms and hence their competitive position in a knowledge-based information economy

These are reasons for all stakeholders to address the question of how to facilitate continuous learning and knowledge formation in all workplaces, including small businesses. A broad spectrum of issues arises from this objective, among which are the questions of

- how to create a supportive learning environment in the workplace
- how to link learning in the workplace to formal VET: i.e. the relationship between training and learning
- how to meet the distinctive needs of the small business sector

A supportive learning environment

Integrating work and learning requires the development of a learning environment that encourages, supports, and rewards learning. Developing a learning culture in the workplace becomes a central objective in the transition to a learning society.

Evidence shows that a focus upon people and teams as the main actors in a dynamic development process fosters a learning culture.[9] A strategic sense of vision and direction also appears to be important. Fostering a learning culture involves a broad spectrum of action relating to such aspects as the design of jobs, work and management practices, incentives, and support mechanisms.

The learning organisation approach incorporates the key features that appear to foster a learning culture. However, there is little experience as yet in applying this approach in the small business sector: *testing* the learning organisation approach in this environment needs to occur.

Linking workplace learning to formal VET provision

Continuous learning in the workplace is likely to involve a mix of formal and informal learning. A workplace that integrates work and learning will provide on-going opportunities for incidental learning as a natural component of work processes. However, up to now informal workplace learning has been undervalued in VET.[10]

In this context, the question arises as to how formal VET provision is best linked to continuous learning in the workplace so as to support and extend such learning. Ideally, many forms of partnership would arise to provide such linkages. Learning from networks is already a growing feature of the small business sector, and it is likely that this form of learning will become even more important in the future. Issues arise as to how to facilitate these processes through brokering a diverse range of learning partnerships and networks.

A particular need relates to providing arrangements for assessment and recognition of workplace learning. While mechanisms exist for recognition of prior learning, ensuring access to these mechanisms in areas such as the small business sector is a priority. There are opportunities for VET institutions, ITABs, industry associations, Group Training Companies, and consultants to promote innovation in developing linkages.

Small business: A unique role

The small business sector has a special role in employment because, in expanding economies, the greatest rate of job creation and growth is usually found in small businesses. A key question therefore becomes how to match a growing commitment to continuous learning in the workplace with the distinctive and often highly individual needs of small businesses.

This question raises a range of issues relating to such aspects as the diversity of the sector, employer attitudes to training, the characteristics of employees, and the common absence of incentives for human resource development.[11] The absence of a training culture in the small business sector is well documented. It has been suggested that traditional approaches to training in the small business sector are based on a failed model, and that a new approach is needed.[12]

A great deal of incidental learning occurs on the job in small businesses, and this can be extended through the use of active, experiential learning strategies. *Changing attitudes to learning and training on the part of both employers and employees will be central to fostering lifelong learning* in small businesses.

Key issues to be addressed include:

- how to build upon and extend the incidental learning that occurs in small businesses developing and testing strategies for active experiential learning, including team learning strategies
- promoting learning partnerships and networks in the sector
- linking continuous workplace learning to knowledge generation and use in small businesses, in particular in the new knowledge based industries
- shifting attitudes to learning and training

A concerted effort will be required to extend lifelong learning opportunities for all in the small business sector.

Connections: Pathways, bridges, transitions

Lifelong learning in a learning society requires a rich web of connected pathways which link education and training to work and social activity, so that opportunities for learning are enhanced. Bridges are necessary to support disadvantaged groups, to provide a safety net and re-entry points, and to ensure that pathways remain open to all. Such pathways and bridges should support the key transitions that individuals face, in moving

- from school to work
- from unemployment to employment
- from job to job
- from returning to employment after a period of absence

Developing pathways has been a key aspect of VET reform in Australia in the past decade. Successive phases of development have included the pilot phase of the Australian Vocational Training System, New Apprenticeships, and the promotion of VET in schools. Equity strategies have sought to build bridges for target disadvantaged groups. Flexible delivery of VET has aimed to open up pathways beyond the traditional institutional access routes.

The process of reform is not yet complete. A number of issues remain to be addressed—particularly for disadvantaged groups, whose pathways are often

blocked by the lack of the foundations for lifelong learning. Bridges that support transitions for disadvantaged groups are a key requirement if lifelong learning for all is to be achieved. These issues have been made critical by the impact of globalisation and new technologies, which together have thrown up a new generation of equity issues threatening social cohesion and creating a growing divide between 'winners' and 'losers.'

Issues which require attention include:

- how to develop an equity culture which mainstreams equity objectives in VET
- how to mainstream flexible delivery so that providers can respond to individual need
- how to harness the learning potential of modern technologies
- how to develop partnerships which support these objectives
- how to address transition issues for disadvantaged groups
- how to improve links between VET, schools, higher education, and industry
- how to enhance the role of adult and community education (ACE) so that links and pathways to the community are strengthened

This is a broad agenda that will require considerable partnership development at all levels, in addition to the national leadership role of Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) in the VET sector. A seamless system of education and training which supports lifelong learning for all may be idealistic—but a pressing need exists for greater coherence in relationships between the sectors of education and training and other stakeholders.

5 VET in a learning society

Assumptions for the future

> *Lifelong learning is at the heart of our vision for a better country.*
>
> (UK Commission on Social Justice 1994)

> *We have no choice but to prepare for this new age in which the key to success will be the continuous education and development of the human mind and imagination.*
>
> (UK Green Paper 1998)

This discussion paper has argued the need for a broader understanding of VET to guide the development of the sector into the next century. The context for this view is the assumption that, in the 21st century, Australia should, can, and will become a 'learning society' in which lifelong learning opportunities will be available to all. This has been a basic principle underpinning the ideas set out in this paper.

This broader view of the VET of the future assumes a necessary convergence of general and vocational education, in many of their components, with the workplace and with society at large. No attempt has been made in this paper to describe the form, extent or components of such convergence. These areas represent fertile ground for future research, thought and discussion.

A convergence of VET and lifelong learning, with the stated purpose of achieving significant improvements, would potentially

- give rise to a new humanism in VET
- give mainstream significance to equity issues
- address the needs of a knowledge-based economy
- lead to a more integrated system with stronger linkages to other sectors
- build on current VET reforms

A renewed focus on *people* in VET could provide motivation and a drive for learning, and the necessary confidence and self-esteem to support life-long learning. This new form of education could address the key attitudinal barriers to a lifelong learning capability.

An integrated form of VET could address the critical equity issues that arise from the emerging conditions of the new millennium in a more holistic and strategic way. It could synthesise mutually supportive components so that all stakeholders would gain. Implementing this expanded vision could provide for many points of contact, interaction and exchange that would add to the richness and relevance of VET provision.

It would also address the needs of a *knowledge-based* economy:

> *The emergence of a knowledge-based economy requires a new synthesis of the functions of training, education and other forms of communication and learning under the single umbrella of the learning organisation.* (Perelman 1984)

It would lead to a more *unified and coherent* system of post-secondary education and training in Australia, providing lifelong learning opportunities for all. The development of an integrated approach to lifelong learning in the 21st century would complement action taken in the higher education sector directed at achieving a learning society in Australia. Finally, a focus on lifelong personal development and learning would support and strengthen the thrust of current VET reforms.

Benefits to stakeholders

Stakeholders would gain from this expanded vision for VET.

- Employers would gain from a more motivated, committed and adaptive workforce with enhanced creativity.
- Individuals would gain from lifelong personal development and learning, from the associated intrinsic satisfaction, and from maintaining employability.
- Society would gain from a vision that contributes to both economic and social development and which strengthens the social underpinning of economic performance.

The new synthesis for VET discussed above would also provide a basis for a necessary strengthening of knowledge and human capital generation in the workplace through knowledge-management systems linked to continuous learning in the workplace. This recognises that in a knowledge-based economy, knowledge generation and use is the primary source of competitive advantage.

From vision to strategies to reality

A shared vision is a starting point for a journey towards an equitable learning society with lifelong learning opportunities for all.

A shared vision would provide VET with a necessary framework, beyond the concept of market economics, as a basis for gaining commitment from all stakeholders to an ideal relevant to the conditions and challenges of the 21st century. It would also facilitate the development of enterprises as adaptive learning organisations. The experience of the Kangan era in Australian TAFE demonstrates the value of a shared vision in providing 'stars to steer by,' and in harnessing energy, commitment and idealism towards shared purposes.

Turning such a vision into reality will require much thought and discussion, and many forms of partnership at all levels. However, there are opportunities for creative initiatives directed towards achieving a humane and competitive learning society that provides lifelong learning opportunities for all. A key requirement will be an agreed strategic framework to provide for coherent development involving all stakeholders.

One purpose of this paper has been to generate discussion about actions that stakeholders could take to progress lifelong learning. However, the larger question of a strategic framework to guide the transition to a learning society needs to be addressed. Development towards this objective could be 'the most exciting Millennium Project of all.'[13]

Notes

1 OECD 1996, p.21.
2 Ibid.
3 UNESCO 1996.
4 Thurow, L 1996, pp.65–87.
5 Lutz, C 1994, p.108.
6 Personal mastery is defined by Peter Senge in the following terms : 'Personal mastery goes beyond competence and skills, though it is grounded in competence and skills. It goes beyond spiritual unfolding or opening; although it requires spiritual growth. It means approaching one's life as a creative work, living life from a creative as opposed to reactive viewpoint' (*The Fifth Discipline*, p.141).
7 Thurow, L 1996, p.317.
8 This profile has been adapted from a profile developed by Candy, P, Crebert, G & O'Leary, J for the university sector in 1994. It is worth noting that the West Committee on higher education took a somewhat different approach by identifying the attributes that all university graduates should acquire (*Learning for Life*, p.47).
9 Harris L & Volet, S 1997, pp.45–51.
10 The subordinate position of informal learning in VET is discussed by Hager, P 1998.
11 An overview of the issues is provided in Field, L 1997.
12 Field, L 1997, p.vi.
13 'Learning for the 21st Century' 1997.

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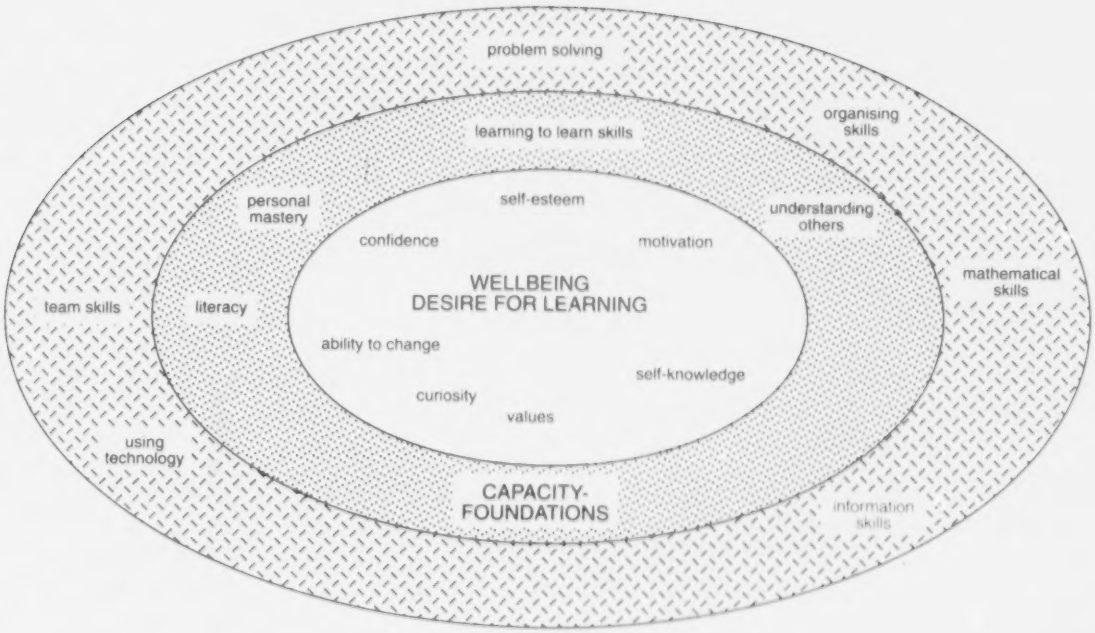
Appendix 1

Lifelong learning capability



Appendix 2

Profile of the learning organisation

Provides learning opportunities for staff

- Work and learning are integrated.
- Inquiry and dialogue are promoted.
- Continuous learning opportunities are created.
- Learning is recognised and rewarded.
- Staff are empowered through learning.
- Personal mastery in staff is actively fostered.

Builds a shared vision

- A shared vision of the organisation and its work is actively fostered.
- Staff are involved in this process as an empowerment strategy towards a collective vision.
- A culture of continuous earning and improvement is actively fostered.

Demonstrates openness to change and adaptability

- The organisation is sensitive to changes in its environment.
- An adaptive culture is actively fostered.
- Reflective practices are built into the habits and procedures of the organisation.
- The organisation is connected to its environment through alliances and partnerships.

Adopts systems perspectives

- There is a sense of the interconnectedness of things.
- Systems perspectives are applied in the work of the organisation.
- Ecological perspectives are applied in understanding change.
- Helicopter vision is actively fostered in staff.

Values and supports team learning

- Team learning is used as a means of fostering and supporting individual learning and for linking individuals to the organisation.
- This is a basic building block in the organisation as a learning organisation.

Is committed to the development of human capital

- Investment in people as the source of human capital is valued.
- There are systematic policies for knowledge management.
- Workplace learning generates new knowledge.

Modern information and communication technologies are systematically used in knowledge management.

These attributes are applied flexibly in different types of organisations—for example small firms, VET institutions, and large corporations.

Appendix 3

Profile of the learning city

Values learning for social transformation, economic development and responsible citizenship

- Promotes itself as a learning city.
- Collaborates with other learning cities.
- Explicitly links learning to social and economic wellbeing.
- Provides a locus for the successful implementation of state and national policy initiatives.
- Recognises and celebrates individual and group learning achievements.

Provides learning opportunities for all

- Promotes pathways and reduces barriers to participation.
- Encourages recognition of uncredentialled prior learning.
- Supports those disadvantaged or denied access to learning opportunities.

Encourages partnerships

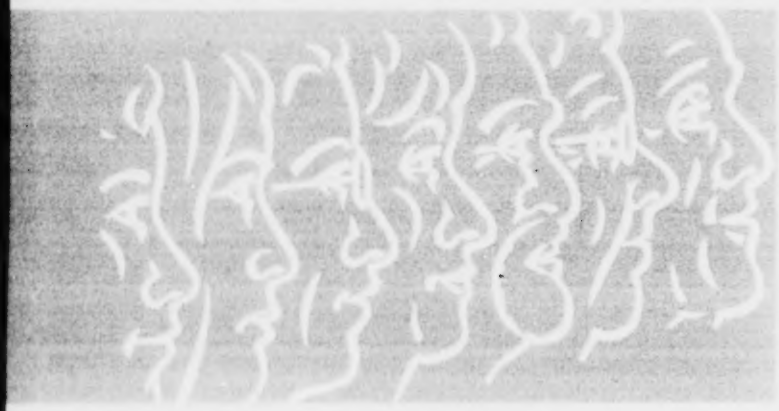
- Brings together providers within particular sectors of education or training.
- Promotes cross-sectoral collaboration and maximum use of 'the city as campus.'
- Facilitates local companies and enterprises becoming learning organisations.
- Encourages clubs, societies and associations to contribute their expertise to the common range of learning opportunities.

Provides information

- Supports the development of electronic databases, and access to them by all citizens.
- Provides information regularly through the media about learning opportunities.
- Provides or supports the provision of an information office, especially for adults who have left formal education.
- Provides a dedicated 'business library' and information service.

Develops and learns from its own experience

- Routinely collects and analyses information about participation in formal and non-formal learning.
- Undertakes planned and strategic evaluations of its progress against agreed performance indicators.
- Offers opportunities for continuous public input and comment.
- Disseminates periodic reviews and analyses of progress.



The University of Technology, Sydney, Research Centre for Vocational Education and Training is an international leader in VET research. It has developed a strong reputation for its work in VET across a wide range of areas, but is especially regarded for its work in the area of vocational learning.

The centre aims to improve VET through research and dissemination and seeks to be a bridge between the academy and the community of practice in VET.

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